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NEA/MAG FOR LAWRENCE, NEA/PI

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KMPI KPAO KDEM TS
SUBJECT: ANOTHER 18 OCTOBER MEETING BLOCKED

REF: TUNIS 224

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for Reasons 1.4 b & d

¶1. (C) Summary: GOT security forces prevented a majority of members of the 18 October Committee (18OC) from attending a press conference held by the group on February 21. Although there were reports that excessive violence was used, Poloff witnessed the opposite: deliberate restraint by police officers who physically blocked entrance to the location. 18OC member and Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) leader Nejib Chebbi claimed that restrictions on freedom of assembly and association in Tunisia were increasingly more severe, for all independent civil society, but especially the 18OC. Chebbi also said that PDP's party newspaper Al Mawkit would not apply for a recently announced MEPI initiative to provide funding for independent media in order not to give the GOT yet another reason to further crack down on the party and paper's activities. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Poloff attended a press conference of the 18 October Committee at the headquarters of opposition party PDP in downtown Tunis on February 21. The 18OC is an alliance of disparate opposition political groups and activists which grew out of the Movement of 18 October hunger strike (reftel). The purpose of the press conference was to discuss GOT-imposed restrictions on meetings of the 18OC and other NGOs. As if to illustrate this complaint, almost all members of the 18OC were prevented from entering the location by a very large number of civilian-clothed police standing at intersections of all contiguous streets. Poloff saw over 60 police on duty, despite the small turnout for the press conference. From the PDP office where press conference attendees sat waiting for the 18OC members to show up, Poloff could see the police physically preventing these members from entering. Poloff saw 18OC members Lotfi Hajji, Hamma Hammami, Ayachi Hammami, Abderraouf Ayadi, and Samir Dilou prevented from approaching the PDP office. Poloff did not see any excessive force used, only human barricades of police standing in the way. At one point Ayadi attempted to break through a gathering of police, but the security official he grabbed was seemingly careful not to use excessive force in restricting his forward progress. At one point a security official raised his hands, apparently to demonstrate he was not acting violently, only blocking entrance to the building.

The 18OC members were arguing with the police throughout this process, saying for example: "I am Tunisian, are you telling me I can't move freely in my own country," and "I am treated like a Palestinian in Israel."

¶3. (C) While the police prevented the entry of the majority of 18OC members into the PDP building, opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedoms (FDL) Secretary General and Committee of 18 October spokesperson Dr. Mustapha Ben Jaafar and Nejib Chebbi were allowed to enter, and eventually the press conference commenced with a small representation of the group. Approximately 6 journalists

attended, including AFP and BBC stringers, along with some PDP members, activists, and a former spokesman of the banned Tunisian Islamic party an-Nahdha, Ali Laaridh, who has recently been released after a 15 year prison sentence. (One of the journalists in attendance predicted that the policemen were going to be in trouble for allowing Laaridh into the PDP office, saying it was obvious they didn't recognize who he was). Participants at the press conference could not explain the seemingly random selection of which 18OC members were permitted to enter the facility.

¶4. (C) During the press conference, Chebbi, Ben Jaafar, and PDP opposition newspaper editor Rachid Hachana took turns discussing the GOT-generated problems encountered in arranging meetings for the 18OC group and its supporters, including meetings in Tunis, Sousse and Sfax that had been blocked by police. They also bemoaned the complete lack of political freedoms for true opposition parties and independent NGOs; touching on media and financial restrictions, but ultimately focusing on the lack of freedom of assembly and association. When mentioning media restrictions, Chebbi mentioned that although the USG had recently announced a MEPI program that finances independent media, they (presumably PDP and Al Mawkif) would not apply so as not to give the GOT yet another reason to crack down on their activities. Chebbi also said that Al Mawkif's distributor was under GOT pressure to cut in half the number of copies of Al Mawkif distributed each week.

¶5. (C) Chebbi said that the role of opposition parties in a democracy -- to provide critical input into a deliberative process that would benefit all citizens -- was completely invalidated by the GOT's suffocating security apparatus. A PDP member who had arrived late said that he had witnessed police "beating up" a couple of the 18OC members who had been trying to enter. Poloff could not confirm this report. At the conclusion of the press conference, Ben Jaafar announced a demonstration in support of freedom of association to be held February 24 at the headquarters of his FTDL party. On February 22, the 18OC disseminated a communique calling all Tunisians to attend a peaceful demonstration to support the freedoms of association, assembly and expression, and calling for an end to "judicial harassment against the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Association of Tunisian Judges, and our youth of Zarzis Ariana, Bizerte, etc." (NB The latter category refers to multiple cases of young Tunisians arrested on anti-terrorism charges whom human rights activists allege were not given fair trials and who were allegedly tortured.)

¶6. (C) Comment: The 18OC members who were able to attend the press conference were clearly frustrated and angry, but seemed at least vindicated in their complaints, since the journalists and HRoff only had to stand up and look out the window to see the strong-armed GOT tactics which they were describing in the press conference. All the speakers emphasized that the restrictions on freedom of assembly/association in Tunisia were increasingly more severe, but especially the 18OC. Certainly the presence of an-Nahdha/Islamist sympathizers in the 18OC (reftel) draws particular GOT ire. It is likely that the GOT allowed Chebbi and Ben Jaafar to attend the press conference due to their status as heads of authorized political parties. Other 18OC members who were prevented from entering were either members of unauthorized parties and associations or were not associated with any specific organization or party apart from the 18OC.

HUDSON